

VZCZCXYZ0007  
OO RUEHWEB

DE RUEHBH #0357/01 1552236  
ZNY CCCCC ZZH  
O 042236Z JUN 09  
FM AMEMBASSY NASSAU  
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 6427  
INFO RUCNCOM/EC CARICOM COLLECTIVE IMMEDIATE

C O N F I D E N T I A L NASSAU 000357

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 06/14/2019  
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [BF](#)  
SUBJECT: PARLIAMENT FRACAS DERAILS BUDGET DEBATE

REF: NASSAU 344

Classified By: Charge Zuniga-Brown for reasons 1.4(b) and (d).

11. (U) SUMMARY: Parliamentary debate on the government's annual budget never got underway June 3 after the House of Assembly degenerated into chaos upon the suspension of the opposition whip for procedural infractions. Opposition deputies failed to force the issue after a day's adjournment, instead complaining to media and a partisan crowd about the government's stifling democratic debate on a minor's suspicious death in police custody. Neither the economy nor crime and justice will be on the agenda again until June 8 as Bahamians head into a long holiday weekend. END SUMMARY

12. (U) At the start of a scheduled parliamentary debate on the state budget (reftel) June 3, Glennys Hanna-Martin, chairwoman of the Progressive Liberal Party (PLP) and leader of opposition business in the national assembly, tried to raise in her opening remarks the question of a minor's apparent suicide in police custody. A fifteen-year old boy was found hanged in a jail cell May 30; relatives disputed the police report of apparent suicide, alleging police mistreatment and fearing a cover-up. Hanna-Martin had telegraphed her intentions through the media, and was quickly rebuffed by Speaker of the House Alvin Smith. The speaker ruled that Hanna-Martin had not given appropriate notice of a change to the agenda according to parliamentary rules.

13. (U) Hanna-Martin persisted, egged on by colleagues demanding she be heard, and the speaker promptly expelled her from the session -- a rare occurrence in Bahamian parliamentary history -- for ignoring his admonitions. When opposition deputies then vigorously challenged the expulsion, and bailiffs were unable or unwilling to physically remove her, the session adjourned. A compromise could not be brokered by party leaders and, within an hour of the doomed session's start, a dramatic finish was ensured: governing Free National Movement (FNM) deputies sang a funeral hymn ("It is Finished") as the Prime Minister packed his papers and left. A curious crowd gathered in the street after state television interrupted live coverage of the fracas, leaving viewers in the dark as to what was happening.

14. (U) PLP deputies made good on their promise to challenge the speaker's decision June 4, arriving en masse to the national assembly for the session. When Hanna-Martin was barred from entering the building, she and other PLP stalwarts, including Opposition Leader Perry Christie -- who was oddly absent during the previous day's fracas -- took their case to the media. The PLP leadership denounced the government for stifling debate on the boy's suspicious death and called for an "impartial" investigation into the circumstances. They expressed support for the police but demanded answers for the boy's family.

15. (U) At another abbreviated assembly session June 4, government deputies upheld the speaker's decision to suspend Hanna-Martin. PLP deputies called the procedure "a mockery" and took their case back to the media and a boisterous crowd

of partisans and passersby in the square outside. With over one hundred people eventually assembled, the demonstration was among the largest Nassau has seen since the May 2007 elections. Throughout the morning's events, a PLP activist with a megaphone aimed particular invective at Minister of National Security, and leader of government business in the assembly, Tommy Turnquest for his handling of events inside and outside parliament.

¶6. (SBU) The PLP evidently decided to push the issue of the young boy's death in custody and to take aim at the vulnerable Minister Turnquest, whose crime-fighting success is often criticized. Yet the FNM speaker and deputies ceded no ground, led by a relaxed PM Ingraham who urged restraint in the face of PLP gibes. The FNM may have raised the stakes higher than the PLP had anticipated, pushing them into the precarious position of criticizing the responsible minister without attacking the police, whose conduct is at the root of the issue. Both sides may be happy to avoid debate on the grim budget projections, for which there are no easy answers, a few days longer.

¶7. (SBU) A prominent religious figure observing events in person June 4 criticized the government for lack of action on crime and justice issues. But he was unimpressed by the public demonstration and said the PLP was clearly "getting mileage" out of the boy's tragic death. At pains to express support for the police while seeking justice for the dead boy's family, he advocated expeditious -- not independent -- investigation of the circumstances.

¶8. (C) COMMENT: The opposition appears to have mishandled an attempt to score political points by seizing on an emotional issue which also touches on an apparent weakness of the FNM government's law-and-order agenda. While partisans may rally to the flag, the PLP missed the chance to attack the government directly over its handling of the budget and economy -- the biggest current social concern -- yet was unable to take control of the parliamentary agenda either. While the issue may yet gain more traction, the opposition risks being seen as exploiting a family's tragedy for its own obvious ends. END COMMENT.  
ZUNIGA-BROWN